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Belarusian Identity: the Impact of Lukashenka's Rule

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Executive Summary

- The modern Belarusian nation emerged as a communist republic of the USSR rather than in the form of a sovereign democratic nation. This communist ideology has had a heavy impact on the formation of the identity of Belarusian people. Emergence of the Belarusian nation coincided with a massive influx of Russian culture and language.

- After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a segment of the Belarusian national elite attempted to restore the ethno-national model of the state. However, when Aliaksandr Lukashenka became president in 1994, he flatly rejected this model and set Belarus on a different path.

- Lukashenka retained much of the USSR's legacy and proceeded with its russification policy, bolstered by Russia that has continuously supported his authoritarian regime politically and financially. Lukashenka's regime has created a "state ideology", a mix of Soviet and nationalist historical narratives, myths and symbols to legitimise itself. Meanwhile, the Belarusian language has almost disappeared from public institutions and mass communication.

- As a result of this policy, a Russian-speaking Belarusian nation with rather weak national identity has formed. However, Belarusians see themselves as a separate nation not willing to become a part of Russia.

- Civil society is a major stakeholder for Belarusianisation. Various types of civic activity such as formal organisations, grassroot meetings and spontaneous campaigns work towards developing both the Belarusian language and culture. The authorities usually tolerate cultural activities carried out on the grassroots level and often even meet the demands of its citizens.

- In terms of its geopolitical choice, Belarus remains a divided nation, with equal shares of proponents for a western path as there are for an eastern one. Most people understand the nation's external relations very pragmatically and are ready to join an integration project, which is suggestive of more economic benefits.

Introduction

The Belarusian nation, unlike most European nations, did not emerge along ethno-national lines, with an indigenous language, culture or a solid nationalist historical narrative. Rather, it consolidated as a result of a communist experiment which lasted for 70 years. It experienced many of the major disasters of the 20th century, including both the Stalinist terror and the horrors of World War II. This turbulent path has impacted Belarusians profoundly and, after 20 years of independence, the Belarusian nation is still trying to find its way.

The regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka has actively opposed the establishment of an ethno-national model of state. He has continued to maintain a style "statist nation" with a centralised bureaucratic machine at its core. This Soviet inspired model continues to function, at the growing market economy and globalisation, making Belarus a unique country, surrounded as it is with EU member states and its decidedly less democratic former Soviet neighbours.

Identity issues, particularly regarding language and the nation's historical narrative, formed the foundation of the persisting cleavage between the authoritarian regime of Aliaksandar Lukashenka and the democratic opposition since 1994. The population of Belarus, although not nearly as divided with regard to its identity as Ukraine, also has not produced a consensual version of self-determination. Identity matters remain crucial for Belarus now, as the process of nation building is still happening. Meanwhile, the ideology of the present regime seems too fragile and fuzzy to have any real role as a consolidating force.

In the context of this paper, the author understands national identity to mean the establishment of relatively stable, role-specific expectations and reflections about one self,[1] which emerge in a community of people as a result of the formation of modern nation-states. National identity itself did not appear spontaneously, but rather formed on the logic of community consolidation within a state's borders. With the various roles of states and their policies in this process being played out across the modern world, one can observe a variety of nations' conceptions of self.

Identity issues, particularly language and history narrative, formed the foundation of the persisting cleavarage between the authoritarian regime and the democratic opposition since 1994

In Belarus, the process of the formation of a modern nation started in the late 19th – early 20th centuries, when Belarus' territories were governed by the Russian Empire. The national movement sought, quite naturally at that time, to create a nation-state based on ethno-national attributes, such as language, culture, and a national historical narrative.

The next stage, which influenced the nation most, was its 70 years under communist rule. Aiming to create a nationless society, Soviet rulers, at the same time, preserved the national principle with the creation of the USSR's constituent republics. Belarus, for the first time in history, appeared as a single nation, although having no true sovereignty over its territory and, of course, no democracy. Soviet identity policy supported the national peculiarities of each of the Soviet republics, but loaded them with Marxist and Leninist ideas. It should also be noted that the

[1] Wendt, Alexander (1992). Anarchy is What States Make of It. *International Organization*, 46:391-426.

USSR took Russian culture as a basis for any future Soviet nation, and it was vastly disseminated across the union.

However, a nationless Soviet society was never to appear, as the USSR fell apart, and for the last 23 years Belarus has been an independent state that has been presided over by an authoritarian government for most of the period.

This government inherited the Soviet bureaucratic machine that was designed to manage a massive public sector, and alongside this inheritance, it also received some Soviet national identity models. Within the context of an independent nation these models undergo a process of transformation, and the Belarusian nation and its identity has been developing into something that diverges in many key ways from the Soviet models that it was founded upon.

On the one hand, the Belarusian nation has already established itself as a state-centered political nation, yet on the other hand, the various identity processes that are unfolding today can have unexpected outcomes provided that the political situation changes.

This paper analyses the processes in Belarusian national identity, particularly with regards to its language, historical narratives and self-contextualisation in an international setting during the period of independence and especially under the rule of Aliaksandr Lukashenka. Based on a number of empirical studies, it attempts to trace a detailed picture of the impact of the political regime and its major political and economic interests in the formulation of Belarus' national identity.

A Turbulent Path to Belarusian Nationhood

Belarus has a millennium of history, but the present name of the country and its borders appeared only quite recently. A Belarusian narrative of history goes back to the Polack and Turaŭ principalities of the 10th century. Later, they and other lands became parts of the Great Duchy of Lithuania, which subsequently united with the Kingdom of Poland in the 16th century. In the 18th century, the great European powers partitioned the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

The present day conception of Belarus and its territory first appeared during the Russian Empire's rule over the lands, an event that over the last two centuries resulted in massive Russia influence over nearly all aspects of Belarusian life. It was only in the 19th century that the Russian administration introduced the name "Belarus" as a formal designation for the territory.

A number of factors significantly hindered the national development of a distinct Belarusian identity including the initial polonisation of the local nobility, the subsequent assimilation politics of the Russian Empire, the small percentage of Belarusians residing in urban areas. Other factors, such as the backwardness of its economy, or the absence of universities and the low level of literacy among the Belarusian population also played a significant role in hindering their identity. Unlike in case of Ukraine, no major powers of Europe were interested to promote Belarusian identity.

As a result, at the beginning of the 20th century Belarus appeared on the European stage as a backward region, unable to engage in a serious struggle for its own independence after the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1918. The attempts made by the founding fathers of the Belarusian People's Republic did not find mass support

among the population. Meanwhile, the communists found considerably more success and the eastern territory of Belarus (East Belarus) entered the USSR to become the first official Belarusian nation-state. Early on in the USSR's history Soviet Belarus saw considerable support for and development of its national culture, a process that occurred alongside a programme of accelerated industrialisation.

However, already in 1930s East Belarus, as in many other Soviet republics at the time, witnessed a wild scale campaign of terror under Stalin's regime, during which a considerable part of the political and cultural elite, as well as common people, were physically eliminated or transplanted to remote regions of Russia.

West Belarus became a part of the Polish Republic without any political or cultural autonomy and experienced widespread assimilation. The scale and extent of Stalin's bloody repression were at the time unknown in the West. East and West Belarus were united only in 1939, when the USSR and Nazi Germany secretly agreed on their respective spheres of influence in Europe and the whole territory of present day Belarus was brought under the control of the USSR. This unlikely and short-lived friendship led to the well-known events. World War II killed a quarter of the population of Belarus and completely destroyed the country. After the war, the young nation had to reforge itself literally from its own ashes.

Over the course of the subsequent 45 years, the Belarusian nation continued to develop as a socialist republic of the Soviet Union. Having no real autonomy and experiencing the overwhelming domination of Russian culture in the USSR, it still managed to retain some of its national features (such as the usage of the Belarusian language in public life), even more so than under the current Lukashenka regime.

Perestroika of the 1980s gave political life to groups that demanded autonomy from the USSR with a much stronger emphasis on an ethno-national version of identity. A nationalist movement grew throughout Perestroika and became one of the most organised oppositional force in Belarus's history.

East and West Belarus united only in 1939, when the USSR and Nazi Germany secretly agreed on their respective spheres of influence in Europe

The other group, which actually presided over the government of the country, was represented by the nomenclature - communist party functionaries and administrative bureaucrats. The nomenclature, unsurprisingly, was heavily sovietised and reluctant to pursue radical reforms, but in light of the events that were unfolding in Moscow which accelerated the collapse of the USSR, the Belarusian communists were all but forced to follow suit and vote for the country's independence in 1990.

A newly independent Belarus, much like other former Soviet republics, experienced a deep economic crisis upon its founding. This did not, however, deter the nationally-oriented segment of the political elite from making another historical attempt at belarusianisation through building a state on the basis of national culture. The Belarusian language became the only official language in the republic and a historical narrative based on pre-Soviet history began to dominate official discourse.

But prospects for an ethno-national Belarusian state did not come true. The 1994 presidential elections brought an unlikely young Member of Parliament to power – Aliaksandr Lukashenka. Hardly anyone at that time could anticipate the subsequent development of the Belarusian nation under his rule.

The Identity Question and the New Regime: the Shadow of Russia

Shortly after his election in 1994, Aliaksandr Lukashenka launched a policy of russification. The rationale behind it seemed clear – Lukashenka chose Russia as a strategic priority in for Belarus' foreign relations, hoping to quickly recover from the economic crisis through re-establishing Soviet economic ties. Allegedly, he even sought to replace Boris Yeltsin in the new post-Soviet federation of nations. Subsequently Belarus entered the union with Russia and this relationship has remained a clear priority for the authorities up until the present, despite the occasional tensions between the two nations.

The other reason for the pro-Russian politics of the regime stem from the anti-Russian discourse of the opposition. Although ideologically diverse, the opposition became associated with the right wing Belarusian People's Front and hardliner Zianon Paźniak. Official propaganda portrayed all members of the opposition as nationalist and accused it of fascism and hatred towards "normal" Belarusians. In 1995, Lukashenka initiated a referendum to introduce Russian as a second official language in Belarus. Officially, 83.3% of voters supported the initiative, though the opposition would go on to dispute the official figures and the transparency of the vote count. The referendum proved to be decisive in the country's future development. From this point forward, the Belarusian language has suffered a major decline.

For most Belarusians, language has never been an issue of much concern. Since the end of the Soviet era, a majority of urban residents have used Russian in their daily communication and do not trouble themselves with issues surrounding the renaissance of an indigenous language that few of them speak. However, as the analysis of empirical data will later show, the short period of belarusianisation in the 1990s had a strong effect on society's language preferences. People perceived the renaissance of Belarusian as a natural process. Still, the policies of the Lukashenka regime reversed it, and the role of the Belarusian language in mass media and communication has diminished dramatically over the past decade.

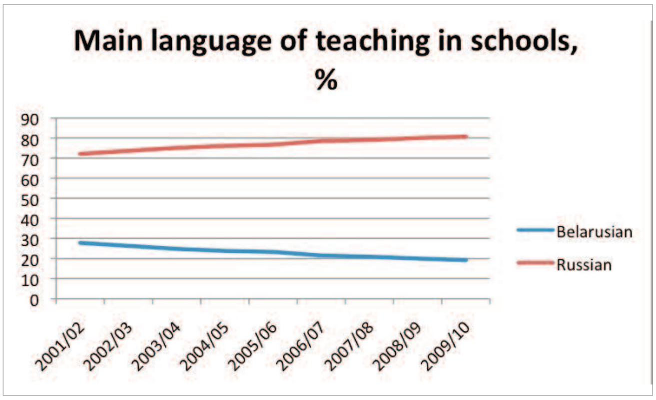
Although the Constitution of Belarus declares the equal status of both languages, Russian de facto dominates all spheres of life

Although the Constitution of Belarus declares the equal status of both languages, Russian de facto dominates all spheres of life. One can hardly find a state official who publicly speaks Belarusian, Lukashenka himself being the best example. All public bodies provide their services and documentation in Russian with a few minor exceptions. The Law on Languages of 1990 does not set strict rules on the use of both languages in the state's operations, and public organisations and officials usually use Russian.

Most important, since the early 2000s all major Belarus-based media has been broadcasting in Russian. At the time of writing, there is no exclusively Belarusian-language TV channel inside of Belarus. According to the bureaucratic logic of Belarusian regime, the Belarusian language does need to have a certain amount of exposure in the media, though mostly in cultural affairs. Hence the recently created Belarus 3 TV channel, whose programming is predominantly culture-oriented, presents many programs in Belarusian. Yet other channels that cover current economic and political affairs, as well as entertainment and films, broadcast their programmes exclusively in Russian. Foreign films are never dubbed in Belarusian and those produced in Belarus also usually use Russian.

Although several radio stations, all of which have a decidedly cultural profile, predominantly broadcast in Belarusian, they remain unpopular among Belarusians, especially among young citizens, who prefer radio stations with modern Russian and western music and idle talk. All national newspapers are published in Russian, with the sole exception of "Zviazda", the only daily newspaper available in Belarusian.

In the middle of 1990s one third of schoolchildren studied in Belarusian. Today, only less than a fifth[2] do so. A majority of Belarusian-language schools are located in villages and their numbers are declining due to negative trends in the nation's rural demographics. In big cities where most children live today the number of Belarusian schools has witnessed a striking decline. Apart from Minsk, not a single fully Belarusian school currently functions in any other major cities in Belarus.



Source: *Ci patrebny Bielarusam bielaruskamoŭnyja školy?,* tut.by, <http://news.tut.by/society/246883.html>, accessed 23 May 2013.

In higher education, the picture that has emerged is rather similar – an all-Belarusian language university does not exist in Belarus. As a rule, the language of lectures is the teacher's choice, but in reality most of them teach in Russian. While there are many "Belarusian language" departments of history or philology, they represent only a small number of university departments.

The only sphere where Belarusian continues to dominate is topography, particularly with regards to signs with the official names of villages, rivers and streets in cities. In Minsk, all public transportation announcements are made in Belarusian. This is the miniscule niche which official bilingualism has reserved for the indigenous Belarusian language.

The Ghost of State Ideology

In the 1990s, Aliaksandr Lukashenka saw no point in creating an institutionalised national ideology, although his politics demonstrated a strong "Slavic unity" orientation with Russia and the Soviet past as a basis for a contemporary Belarusian national identity. But as hopes for claiming the Russian throne vanished with the rise of Vladimir Putin, Lukashenka made it clear that he had no intentions of challenging Putin's rule. Once Lukashenka had conceded that he would not spread his authority beyond Belarus' borders, he sought to elaborate on a new ideology to legitimate his rule inside Belarus.

As a result, ideology departments and positions appeared in almost every state organisation, from universities to enterprises, and the profession of "ideologist" became

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2 *Ci patrebny Bielarusam bielaruskamoŭnyja školy?,* tut.by, <http://news.tut.by/society/246883.html>, accessed 23 May 2013.

widespread in modern Belarus. Through these structures the regime is attempting to constrain the spread of divergent ideas, including those of opposition politics. Despite its vast institutionalisation, state ideology has failed to become a tool of national consolidation around the Belarusian leadership. It is at once too fuzzy and pluralistic, particularly when consideration is given to the fact that various official thinkers have tried to create their own versions without any firm boundaries, save the significance of Lukashenka for the development of the modern Belarusian nation. These different versions of state ideology have varied from blatant Russia-centrism, regarding Belarus as a part of a single great Russian nation, to stories quite similar to the 1990s nationalist renaissance narratives.

Despite its vast institutionalisation, state ideology has failed to become a tool of national consolidation around the Belarusian leadership.

However, as any state requires an established genealogy to enshrine the legitimacy of its existence, the regime did not dare to dismiss all elements of the nationalistic historical narrative, but rather conveniently merged them with Soviet mythology. This merged identity became core of the contemporary politics of history in Belarus.

Politics of History: Soviet Glory with a Medieval Flavour

In the 1990s, a nationalist approach dominated Belarusian politics of history. It rejected Soviet models and created narratives that glorified medieval Belarusian statehood and its connection to its European past. After Lukashenka came to power in 1994, a reversal took place with Soviet narrative of history, especially its version of World War II, serving as its core element.

Lukashenka's narrative, however, managed to reconcile the nationalist version of history of the pre-Soviet period with its own modern conception of Belarusian history. They both agree that Belarusian statehood has a long tradition of independent existence and is valued by all Belarusians. Also, unlike the Soviet version of the Belarusian history, which involved class struggle and Russia-centrism during every period of Belarusian history, the official narrative does not afford much attention to the class-based ideological approach nor does it necessarily seek to prove the ancient roots of friendship with Russia. Still, the period of independence (since the early 1990s) remains the most ideologically charged and distorted issue facing Belarus' identity, as it involves the rule of Lukashenka himself.

Take for instance a history textbook for schools that was published in 2006.[3] The book covers the period from 1945-2005, the post-war period for the USSR and independent Belarus. When mentioning Belarus, the authors do not find any negative elements of the Soviet epoch. When it comes to describing the period of Perestroika, schoolchildren will not find any information on the Belarusian Popular Front or any other anti-Soviet nationalist associations that emerged during the period of liberalisation in the 1980s. Likewise, the book does not mention the Kurapaty burial grounds, discovered by Zianon Paźniak, the place where thousands of Belarusians were executed during Stalin's reign of terror. Despite these other issues, the most distorted period in the current textbooks remains the period of Lukashenka's rule of Belarus.

The idea of the extraordinary role played by Aliaksandr Lukashenka in Belarusian modern history has become the main element of the official narrative, an attempt to form a crude cult of personality. It portrays his every major political step as something

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[3] Fomin, V.M., Panov, S.V. and Ganushchenko, N.N (2006). *Istoria Belarusi 1945-2005. Uchebnik dlia 10 klasa obshcheobrazovatelnych shkol s russkim jazykom obuchenia,* Minsk: BGU.

extremely important for the nation and desired by the common people. Meanwhile, the book remains silent on the very active period of party politics in the first half of 1990s and fails to mention how Lukashenka used violence to consolidate his power. Reading the book, one gets the impression that neither the opposition nor Belarusian civil society ever existed. There are just two main actors: the president and the Belarusian people, who, naturally, fully support him.

Thus, the logic of independence made the regime accept certain elements of national history which was impossible during the USSR. It does not reject the importance of medieval Belarusian statehood or tensions with Russia, but the current political momentum requires close relations with Russia to extract the funds necessary for the regime's stability.

The next section will discuss the impact of Lukashenka rule on other important elements of identity – the use of language and the self-awareness of the Belarusian people. It reviews a number of empirical studies that show how these processes developed over the past two decades.

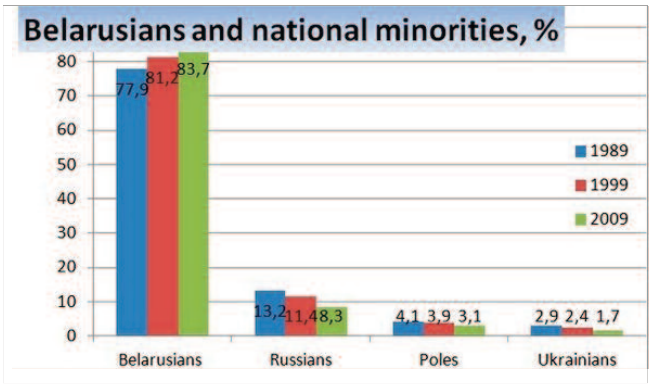
Trends in Self-Awareness and Language Use

A Russian Speaking Belarusian Nation

Official population censuses, which were conducted in 1989, 1999 and 2009,[4] reveal a number of interesting trends. They show that the proportion of those who identify themselves as Belarusians is increasing, but the use of Belarusian language has dramatically declined, leading to the formation of a Russian-speaking Belarusian nation.

Belarus remains a relatively mono-ethnic nation-state. Among the national minorities the largest are Russians, Poles, and Ukrainians. Notably, the number of people who consider themselves Belarusians has increased from 80% to 84% over the last twenty years.

Traditionally, the Russian minority resides in the central and northern parts of Belarus and in large urban areas. The Polish minority makes up a considerable part of the western region of Hrodna. Ukrainians settle more densely in the southern Brest and Homiel regions near the Ukrainian border.



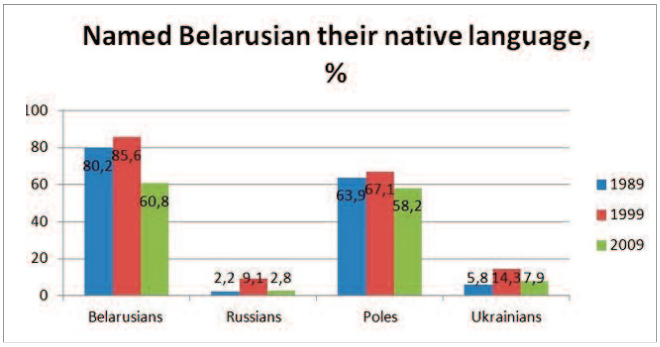
Source: National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus. Population Census 2009. Ethnic composition of the Population of the Republic of Belarus (Volume 3).

[4] National Statistical Committee of Belarus. Publications of 2009 Census. <http://belstat.gov.by/homep/ru/perepic/2009/itogi1.php>, accessed 14 April 2013.

As the diagram shows, the size of each of minority groups (especially Russians) has been decreasing since 1989. This trend apparently shows that minorities have assimilated and changed their identities along with the development of a Belarusian independent state. On the other hand, it may also indicate growing national consciousness among Belarusians, who identified themselves with another national identity previously.

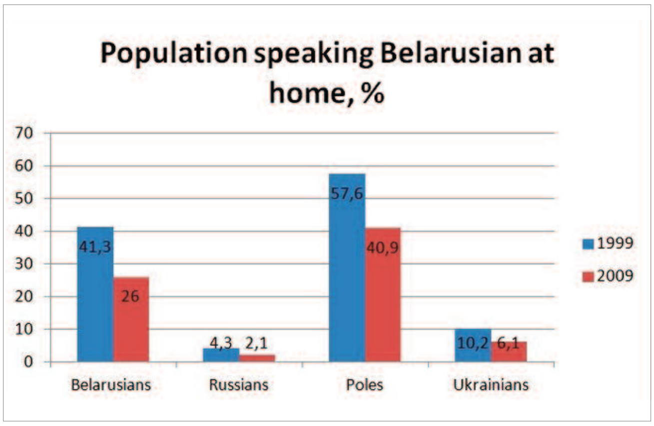
This can be explained by the confusion that was the result of labels associated with an individual's religion and nationality. It was common for Orthodox Belarusians to call themselves "Russian" while Catholics referred to themselves as "Poles". Such consciousness widely existed in Belarus even in the late USSR and during its early days of independence, especially in rural areas.

However, this growing national consciousness is not based on language and culture of the dominant ethnic group, as is usually the case with modern nation states. On the contrary, the significance of the Belarusian language has declined over this period. In the 1990s, before the Lukashenka regime had come into its own, the national renaissance policy improved the position of the Belarusian language in the daily communication of the population. But the stabilisation of the regime brought with it the decay of the Belarusian language in daily usage as is clearly demonstrated in the diagram below.



Source: National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus. Population Census 2009. Ethnic composition of the Population of the Republic of Belarus (Volume 3).

The same concerns such indicators as the use of Belarusian language at home, which shows the actual viability of the language. Here, the decline appeared to be even more dramatic.



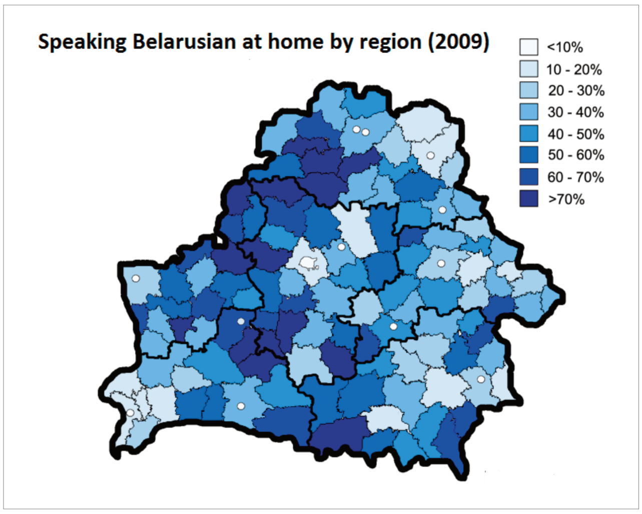
Source: National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus. Population Census 2009. Ethnic composition of the Population of the Republic of Belarus (Volume 3).

Only a quarter of Belarusians speaks Belarusian at home, which roughly equals the number of the total rural population. Belarusian Poles signify an interesting phenomenon when it comes to the Belarusian language. They are the biggest national group in relation to the total number of a group who speak Belarusian at home. Out of 295,000 Poles, 120,000, or 40 per cent, speak Belarusian at home, while the share of Belarusians speaking Belarusian at home is only 26 per cent.

The term "Pole" in Belarus has a rather confusing and ambiguous meaning, as Belarusian Poles are in fact Belarusians of the Roman Catholic religious tradition, which historically has been under the strong influence of Poland. This group, though referring to Polish identity, evidently is a community that strongly preserves the features of Belarusian culture. The language policy of the Catholic Church also influences this process, as it uses mostly Belarusian as the language of service. Meanwhile, the Orthodox Church uses exclusively Old Slavic and Russian in its services.

In Minsk, the number of people who indicated Belarusian as their native language has decreased almost two-fold over the 1999-2009 decade. In general, only a little more than 10 per cent of the urban population of Belarus speaks Belarusian at home, and for the largest cities this number is much smaller.

It is also worth noting the regional spread of Belarusian language. Traditionally, the less russified western region of Belarus is considered to be more Belarusian-speaking, while eastern Belarus, which entered the USSR 20 years earlier and until now has had closer relations with Russia, appears to be more Russian-speaking. The data of the 2009 census confirms this view.



Source: National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus. Population Census 2009. Statistical bulletin on the general number of population, its composition by age, gender, marital status, education, nationality, language, and sources of income.

The region with the highest percentage of Belarusian-speakers is the one to the northwest of Minsk on the Lithuanian border. Interestingly, this particular region correlates with the pro-democratic and anti-Lukashenka voting areas[5] of regional political preferences. It is also the region where the leader of national renaissance of 1980s-1990s, Zianon Paźniak, comes from. Perhaps equally surprising, the areas of

5 Kazakievič, Andrej (2007). Palityčnaja kartahrafija Bielarusi ŭ vynikach prezidenckich vybaraŭ 1994-2006 hadoŭ. Palityčnaja sfiera №7: 5-18. <http://palityka.org/pdf/07/0703.pdf>, accessed 27 August 2013.

western Belarus in the south do not show such correlation, as neither a strong preservation of the Belarusian language nor a high level of support for opposition is observed here.

Civil Society as a Major Belarusianisation Stakeholder

The picture described above clearly shows that the Belarusian language today exists in a highly unfavourable, even hostile, environment. The state refuses to complicate its own machinery by introducing Belarusian and Russian as two equal languages under the eyes of the law. The political elite does not have any particularly strong ties to any thing that might be described as national values. Most of the population take a more pragmatic stance towards the language issue and follow the example established by the ruling elite.

The only actor that has made any serious attempts to revive the Belarusian language and introduce it into public life is civil society. Independent media has played a leading role in this regard. The newspaper Naša Niva, Radio Liberty, European Radio for Belarus and Belsat TV are the largest independent media to exclusively use Belarusian language in their work.

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Apart from the media, various forms of support for Belarusian has emerged inside of Belarusian civil society itself. The largest campaign for the promotion of Belarusian culture and language is Budźma Bielarusami (Let's be Belarusians). Launched in 2008, it has carried out numerous projects in Minsk and throughout the various regions of Belarus.

Many such activities are purely grassroots campaigns. The Belarusian language courses entitled “Mova ci kava” (Language or Coffee) started in 2013 in Moscow by enthusiasts, but soon spread to Minsk. Organised through social networks and held in an informal and friendly atmosphere, it has become very popular among young people.

Many campaigns to protect Belarusian appear spontaneously as a reaction to the russification policies of the authorities. Fine examples of such campaigns have occurred in recent years. One of them - when Minsk authorities attempted to make public transportation announcements and signs only in Russian language, they were met with stiff opposition. The very day that they had everything switched over to Russian, citizens organised a wave of complaints and formally addressed the authorities, who immediately restored the Belarusian language in all spheres of public transportation, scared as they were by the unprecedented reaction by the city’s citizenry.

As both of these cases show, citizens are able to successfully advocate for Belarusianisation. The authorities have nothing to do but concede if the issue receives enough attention from Belarusians. Generally, the regime tolerates cultural activity as it does not see a direct threat to its stability with these kinds of campaigns and actions. In the end, it very much depends on the active participation of Belarusians whether or not an alternative cultural environment will appear in Belarus.

A Mixed Self-Awareness

Another important issue of national identity is people's view of themselves and the group that they consider themselves to belong to, elements that often form the foundations of identity. A study of the ethnic identity of Belarusians carried out by the Institute of Sociology in 2000-2004[6] shows that the younger generation considers their ethnic identity to be less important than older generations. The same concerns the more educated segments of society and those who live in urban areas. It means that younger, more educated people demonstrate a stronger trend towards integration in an international context and less connection to specific territorial or ethnic identities. Meanwhile, the older, less educated rural population with low social mobility and communication levels sense their ethnicity in a more stronger manner.

Regional differences also have clear indications with regard to ethnic identity. Inhabitants of the Hrodna region view it as the most important item, while residents of the eastern Belarusian regions of Mahilioŭ and Homiel have a more fuzzy ethnic consciousness.

Another study entitled “National Identity in the Views of Belarusians[7]” was conducted by Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies and Novak laboratory in 2009. It identified some important aspects of Belarusian national self-consciousness. When asked “what unites you with other people of your nationality?”, Belarusians most often refer to territory and state, rather than culture and language as the most important in defining themselves. Political unity based on the state serves the core idea of the official ideology of the Lukashenka regime, and it certainly has affected the views of Belarusians which is clear from this poll data.

> When asked “What unites you with other people of your nationality?”, Belarusians most often refer to territory and state, rather than culture and language.

Responses to the question, “What do you consider the origin of Belarusian statehood?” brought rather interesting results. 38% mentioned the Great Duchy of Lithuania, 18% said the Polack and Turaŭ princedoms, and only 12% said the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. This data presents a radical step away from Soviet identity and the creation of a longer-term perception of Belarus’ national genealogy, which is also supported by the official ideology.

Still, it should be noted that Belarusians have already accepted the symbols of the Lukashenka regime introduced in 1990s. 57% consider 3 July, the Day of Liberation of Minsk from the Nazis[8], as the main national holiday, while 25 March, the Declaration of Independence of Belarusian Popular Republic in 1918, and 27 July, the Declaration of State Sovereignty of Belarus, were supported only by 1% of respondents. The same concerns the national flag issue. 73% consider the present (and

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6 Naumienka, Liudmila, (2008). “Etnicheskaia identichnost’ belorusov: sodierzhanie, dinamika, regional’naia i social’no-demograficheskaia specifika”, in O. Proleskovskii, G. Osilov (ed.), *Belarus i Rossiia: social’naia sfera i sociokul’turnaia dinamika*, Minsk, <http://www.isprras.ru/pics/File/Rus_Bel/br-111-132.pdf>, accessed 27 August 2013.

7 Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies and Novak laboratory (2009). Vyniki sacyjalahičnaha dasliedavannia “Nacyjanaĺnaja identyčnasć vačami bielarusaŭ: chto my i jakimi my budziem?”. <http://budzma.org/socium/pres-reliz-pa-vynikakh-prezyentacyi-sacyyalahichnaha-daslyedvannya-nacyyanalnaya-identychnasc-vachami-byelarusaw-khto-my-i-yakimi-my-budzyem.html>, accessed 27 August 2013.

8 For the history of 3 July, see Vadzim Bylina. *Belarus Independence Day: Reviving the Soviet Myths*, Belarus Digest, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-independence-day-reviving-soviet-myths-14568>, accessed 27 August 2013.

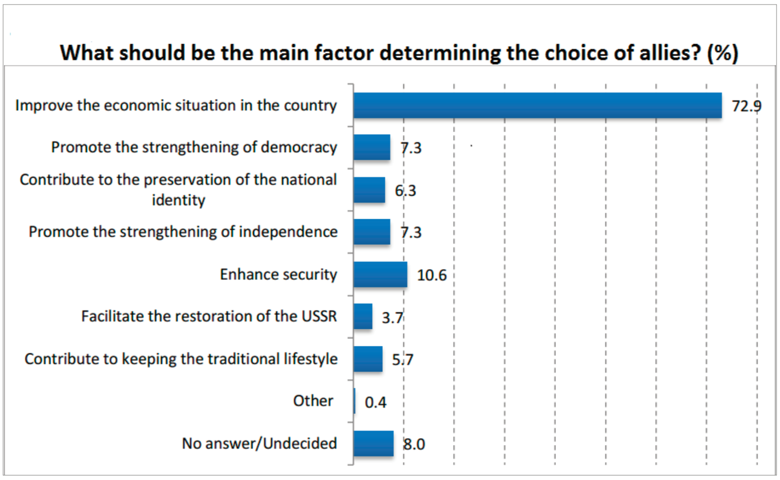
former Soviet) green-red flag as their flag, while only 8% maintain the white-red-white flag to be the nation's true flag[9].

The results of this study show that the Lukashenka regime's ideological discourse has had a massive impact on the opinions of Belarusians and their national identity. It presents a mix of both nationalist and Soviet concepts and therefore creates the same mixed view in the minds of people, who know their roots to be found somewhere in a medieval European context, but at the same time respect Soviet symbols. Following the nature of the political regime, people tend to express a political and statist orientation rather than a cultural view with regards to national unity.

Geopolitical Choice of Belarusians: Pragmatism without USSR Sentiments

The geopolitical views of citizens, their understanding of foreign relations, that is to say who are the nation's "friends and enemies", serves an important function in the formation of national identity and, conversely, is also affected by state policy on national identity. A number of polls on geopolitical attitudes in recent years studied Belarusians' perceptions of foreign countries. Here, several diagrams from such studies will be presented. Some of them appeared in research carried out by the Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies'[10], while others were presented in several publications put out by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies[11].

BISS research proves that people's view of Belarus' foreign relations is largely utilitarian and is based on individual economic interests and not on any particular cultural or political sentiment. 73% of respondents replied that economic development should be the main criteria for making any geopolitical decisions, while such values as democracy, national identity and independence received only 6-7% support from the survey's respondents.



Source: Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies. *Geopolitical preferences of Belarusians: a too pragmatic nation?*, <http://belinstitute.eu/sites/biss.newmediahost.info/files/attached-files/BISS_SA07_2013en.pdf>, accessed 07 August 2013.

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9 For the issue of white-red-white flag, see Vadzim Bylina. *White-Red-White Flag: the True Belarusian Symbol or the Sign of Opposition?,* Belarus Digest, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/white-red-white-flag-true-belarusian-symbol-or-sign-opposition-14093>, accessed 07 August 2013.

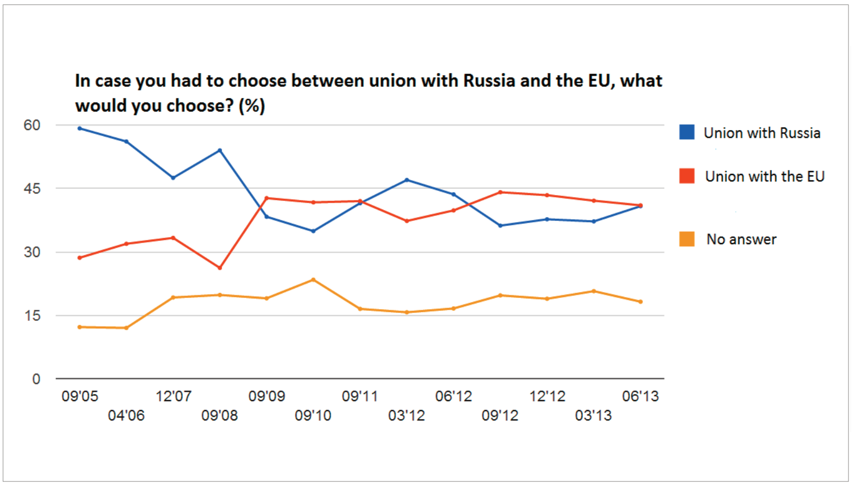
10 *Geopolitical preferences of Belarusians: a too pragmatic nation?,* Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, <http://belinstitute.eu/sites/biss.newmediahost.info/files/attached-files/BISS_SA07_2013en.pdf>, accessed 07 August 2013.

11 Dinamika belarusskogo obshchestvennogo mnenia, Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, <http://www.iiseps.org/trends/11>, accessed 07 August 2013.

Belarusians express their readiness to join Russia and the European Union in almost equal measure, so long as it will promote the nation's economic development. However, the authors who carried out the research note that these kinds of economic unions for Belarusians are defined as free trade areas or, in other terms, a common economic space. For instance, only 7% of people would like to see deeper political integration with Russia alongside economic integration. Belarusians are also reluctant to enter into any kind of military unions with either the west or east, and instead wish to retain their own large national industries, keeping them out of reach of foreign capital and foreign hands.

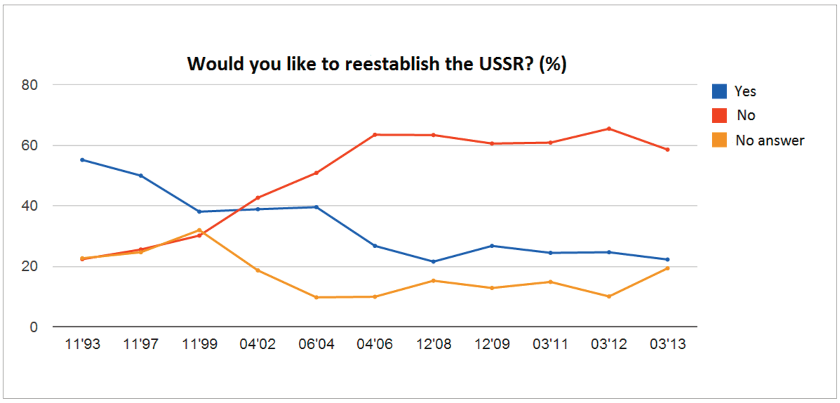
A third of Belarusians prefer to live in Belarus and remain independent of any integration projects. At the same time, 60% would prefer any kind of integration, either with Russia or with the EU, or with both. So, while a substantial segment of the population remains reluctant to integrate with any country, a majority of the population agrees that it is not only possible, but also desirable.

Previous data referred to the opinions of Belarusians in 2009, while IISEPS' data presents their geopolitical preferences over a span of the past 8 years. The following diagram shows that in 2005, 60% of respondents supported the union with Russia and only 30% preferred a European path of integration. In 2009 this rate already obtained a certain balance with 40% of supporters on both sides. This balance persists up to the present day and shows that Belarus indeed remains a divided nation with regards to its attitudes towards its own geopolitical preferences.



Source: Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies. *Dynamics of Belarusian public opinion*, <http://www.iiseps.org/trends/11>, accessed 07 August 2013.

The last diagram shows the position of Belarusians towards the restoration of the USSR. Such sentiments were quite popular in the 1990s when the economy declined and people lacked the stability of the Soviet system that they were accustomed to. But as the economy grew throughout the 2000s, the number of proponents for the USSR steadily decreased and now makes up around only 20% of the population. So, the idea of Belarus as a Soviet nation should be assessed more thoroughly in order to come to a better understanding of these trends. Some elements of Soviet institutions persist in Belarus, especially the domination of the state in society and the economy, but it does not mean that Belarusians are eager to restore the Soviet political system or way of life.



Source: Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies. *Dynamics of Belarusian public opinion*, <http://www.iiseps.org/trends/11>, accessed 07 August 2013.

The studies presented here show some important features present in Belarusians' geopolitical views. First, they express a purely utilitarian understanding of foreign relations and are ready to join the integration project which offers the most economic benefits. Taken out of the equation, then, is a preference for any particular political or national values in mind when making their geopolitical choice, a feature that is markedly different from their neighbours' motivations who joined the EU in 2004. These kinds of views, in many ways, resemble the opportunistic foreign policy of Lukashenka's regime, which seeks momentary benefits without having any noticeable concrete strategic approach.

Second, a large number of Belarusians express isolationist views, while others remain divided in trying to decide between the east and the west. No consensus on this matter exists in Belarusian society, Belarus truly remains a place where civilisations clash.

Third, although Belarusians are often considered a Soviet-style nation that stubbornly persists in holding onto the USSR's legacy, in the end its people actually do not want to witness the restoration of Soviet regime.

Conclusion

The Belarusian state (or political regime, which is one in same in this case) retains a strong hold over society and has deeply affected the self-consciousness of its citizens over nearly two decades of Lukashenka's rule. It has brought much of the Soviet legacy back and rejected an ethno-national identity as a path for state building. It effectively halted the revival of the Belarusian language and led to its near extinction in mass communication and public institutions. It developed an eclectic ideology, indoctrinating it through state and, more specifically, educational institutions.

As a result, the majority of Belarusians still have a rather weak national identity. Instead, the territory and the state itself became the main subject of affiliation for them.

Inside Belarus, where alternative political subjects and civil society have been destroyed, no strong advocacy group that might propose an alternative identity can effectively function or push their agenda.

The main source of regime identity politics remains the ongoing economic game with Russia. If Moscow continues to feed the regime, a Soviet and Russia-oriented identity

will persist in Belarus. But if a major long-term conflict erupts between them, these politics are likely to change. If such a situation were to arise, it is likely that the regime itself would change and new players would come onto the national scene.

There is still another problem that can yet emerge, particularly considering the attitude of the political and economic elite towards the issue of identity. The current Belarusian elite has no sense of national pride or concern for anything save their own material wellbeing. Whether they will alter their behaviour and involve alternative identity politics when the regime changes is still unclear.

Common Belarusians, for their part, try to mimic their rulers and remain very pragmatic with regard to the question of national identity. However, as a nation that has seen numerous dramatic changes throughout its history, it will always be ready to adapt to new circumstances, whatever they may be.

Despite the current pro-Russian direction of the nation's politics, half of Belarusians are already exhibiting Europe-friendly views. Belarusians appreciate their country's independence and do not want go back to the USSR. More and more people have the opportunity to travel abroad and use the Internet on a daily basis. The regime is unable to fully control society, and society itself is gradually developing autonomously of the state.

Younger generations will play a crucial role in the future development of the Belarusian nation. They communicate by the Internet, which remains a free and open space for communication and exchnge of ideas in Belarus. They did not undergo Soviet indoctrination or experience its relentless propaganda and tend to prefer to work in the private sector, meaning they are less and less tied to the state. These people look much more free and democratically minded then their parents, and quite soon they will rule the country.

About the Author

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About the Centre for Transition Studies

The Centre for Transition Studies is a private, non-profit organisation dedicated to analysis and policy advocacy on problems which Belarus faces in its transition to market economy and the rule of law. Its work is nonpartisan and dedicated to achieving practical results.

Its analysts working in Minsk, Kyiv, London and Berlin understand the challenges of transition in the region because they have lived through it. Educated at the world's leading universities, the centre's experts have cultivated the culture and technical skills required to deliver Western-style analysis.

The mission of the Centre for Transition Studies is to contribute to better understanding of transition processes in Belarus and learn from experience of other countries. It conducts research which requires multinational outlook and engage in areas which demand cannot be fully met by the domestically trained specialists.

The Centre aims to promote reforms and thinking which helps the economy become more competitive, governance more efficient and integrate Belarusian scholars and analysts in pan-European and global media and networks of scholars.

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